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# Theological Non-Negotiables in Martin Luther’s Hymns for Confessing Jesus Christ in the Twenty-first Century<sup>1</sup>

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In tribute to Professor Gwendolyn Beth Saylor, PhD, friend, and long-term colleague, let me say at the outset: this essay has benefited greatly from my reflection on her vocation as a teacher of the church with the primary focus on Scripture, and her avocation of playing the piano. Yes, she was drawn to Luther’s hymns.

Throughout the history of the church, there is an ongoing crisis of defining and confessing the Gospel. The sixteenth-century Reformation associated with Martin Luther and other Reformers has been characterized in terms of justification of the sinner by works versus justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Luther interpreted the message of the church of his day as being the former and strove to recall the church to the latter. Specifically, he called the church to see that the biblical witness, particularly in the writings of the Apostle Paul, pointed to the latter: justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in the very opening paragraph of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ)*, which was signed by The Lutheran World Federation and The Roman Catholic Church on 31 October 1999, the historical reality of the division over the doctrine of justification is acknowledged:

The doctrine of justification was of central importance for the Lutheran Reformation of the sixteenth century. It was held to be the “first and chief article” [The Smalcald Articles, II, 1; Book of Concord, 292] and at the same time the “ruler and judge over all other Christian doctrines.” [“Rector et iudex super omnia genera doctrinarum”—Weimar Edition of Luther’s Works (WA), 39, 1, 205]. The doctrine of justification was particularly asserted and defended in its Reformation shape and special valuation over against the Roman Catholic Church and

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1. The theological thrust of this essay was presented under the heading, “Hearing the Gospel in Select Luther Hymns for Witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” at the Luther Academy of the Rockies (an annual continuing education event for pastoral leaders—pastors, deacons, laity—offered by Wartburg Theological Seminary), 12-22 June 2018, Allenspark, Colorado, U.S.A.

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theology of that time, which in turn asserted and defended a doctrine of justification of a different character. From the Reformation perspective, justification was the crux of all the disputes. Doctrinal condemnations were put forward both in the Lutheran Confessions and by the Roman Catholic Church’s Council of Trent. These condemnations are still valid today and thus have a church-dividing effect.<sup>2</sup>

The doctrinal breakthrough which the *JDDJ* represents is both crucial to the work still to be done and a historic impetus to continue the work<sup>3</sup> “toward that visible unity which is Christ’s

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2. *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, The Lutheran World Federation and The Roman Catholic Church (Grand Rapids, Michigan, U.S.A./Cambridge, U.K., 2000), 9 (paragraph 1). At the conclusion of this opening paragraph on page 1, there is footnote 3, which reads: “It should be noted that some Lutheran churches include only the Augsburg Confession and Luther’s Small Catechism among their binding confessions. These texts contain no condemnations about justification in relation to the Roman Catholic Church.”

3. The penultimate paragraph (43) of *JDDJ* reads: “Our consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification must come to influence the life and teachings of our churches. Here it must prove itself. In this respect, there are still questions of varying importance which need further clarification. These include, among other topics, the relationship between the Word of God and church doctrine, as well as ecclesiology, ecclesial authority, church unity, ministry, the sacraments, and the relation between justification and social ethics. We are convinced that the consensus we have reached offers a solid basis for this clarification. *The Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church will continue to strive together to deepen this common understanding*”

will.<sup>24</sup> In this vein, we turn to select hymns by Martin Luther to highlight and explicate their evangelical foundation and continuing witness to the Gospel.

Luther has been described as a superb communicator: as one who communicated complex ideas in simple language that a broad audience might understand the Gospel; and he did so without making the Gospel simplistic and thereby losing something of its substance. In short, he was skilled at using simple language without being simplistic. This is patently evident in Luther's voluminous writings, which include hymns. In all of them, the focus is always on central doctrines of the Christian faith; and his poetic articulation is infused with his grasp of the doctrine of justification grounded in the biblical witness. His hymns give a clear articulation of the evangelical framework he uses; it is a framework which remains a vital resource to the church today in its witness to the Gospel. Peter Brunner recognizes this fact when he declares:

The congregation needs a concise verbal form, which comprehensively summarizes the basic element of the message of salvation and the central content of glorification. It is impossible for the congregation to have the entire text of Paul's Epistle to the Romans before it, but it may well be conversant with Luther's hymn "From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee." We are tempted to speak of a pedagogical function of the hymn here. This designation indeed intimates what we have in mind, but it does not entirely cover it. In a tangible, forceful, and impressive form the hymn visualizes and presents the message of salvation, or individual, important segments of it. And the tangibility, forcefulness, and impressiveness of this form of expression is, not in the last place, also due to the fact that it is poetry.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, in the poetry of Luther's hymns his witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the teaching of fundamentals of the Christian faith are bound together. With creativity and evangelical faithfulness, Luther shows how *fide qua* and *fide quae*—the act of trusting/believing *and* the content of what is believed, respectively—rightly form a unity.

The hermeneutical approach to Luther's hymns<sup>6</sup> in this article may be characterized as theological-literary: a reading and

*of justification and to make it bear fruit in the life and teaching of the churches.*" [Emphasis added].

4. The concluding paragraph (44) of the *JDDJ* is both a prayer and a call to prayer, "We give thanks to the Lord for this decisive step forward on the way to overcoming the division of the church. We ask the Holy Spirit to lead us further toward that visible unity which is Christ's will."

5. Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, trans. M. H. Bertram; Foreword by Walter E. Buszin (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 268-269.

6. The hymns used in this theological essay are in the English translation in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. The approach does not engage the question of what attribution of Luther's authorship, in part or as a whole, means. That question is a crucial one, which will not be pursued in this essay.

Luther has been described as a superb communicator: ... he was skilled at using simple language without being simplistic. ... The focus is always on central doctrines of the Christian faith; and ... the doctrine of justification grounded in the biblical witness.

interpretation of the text in its theological articulation of the Christian faith through the lens of the doctrine of justification. In describing the approach as theological-literary, it would be helpful to the reader to offer this working definition of systematic theology: the academic discipline of critical reflection on the truth and meaning of Christian faith today, in light of Scripture as the norming norm which is not normed (*norma normans*), the Creeds and the Confessions, which are norms which are normed (*norma normata*), insights from other disciplines such as history, philosophy, science, literature, social sciences, and in the face of contemporary questions about truth and meaning.

As human beings, we are constituted by stories. The Gospel of Jesus Christ takes our stories and transforms them. In this regard, the biography of the interpreter plays a critical role, sometimes a decisive role, in the interpretation of the text. To speak about the biography of the interpreter necessarily calls us to attend to the human condition; to do so inevitably means that the interlinked questions of truth and meaning will be present. They are real even when they are implicit.

The human condition and the call to faith in Jesus, whereby faith, as trust, is participation in the saving work of Jesus Christ, are evident in Luther's hymns. In its indispensable participation in *missio Dei*, the "one holy catholic and apostolic church" offers that promise of salvation in Jesus Christ that through the Spirit others will hear and believe the promise which is life-giving. For Luther, we cannot say enough about the humanity of Jesus. Jesus really touched human reality, for he was indeed fully human, even as he was fully divine. Our sin was not so bad, so abominable, or so repulsive that Jesus stepped away from the messiness of life. On the contrary, he entered into the sinful human condition. Being human is not to be equated with being a sinner. Yes, we cannot not sin. Consequently, we ask, how does Luther describe the human condition in the hymns we will now theologially analyze in their poetic expression of the Christian faith?

Here, we highlight primary ways in which Luther repeatedly describes the human condition and the existential, historical reality of the church of his day. The universal human condition and the particular state of the church are both illumined. In the

hymn, "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word," in speaking of the human condition as death, Luther implores, "O Comforter of priceless worth...lead us out of death to life."<sup>7</sup> The church is under threat: "...defend your holy church..."<sup>8</sup> He declares that disunity on earth is evident and thus asks God to "...send peace and unity on earth..."<sup>9</sup>

In the hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," Luther speaks of the human condition in terms of the overriding power of Satan<sup>10</sup> which human beings cannot match: "No strength of ours can match his might! We would be lost, rejected."<sup>11</sup> The power of Satan is pervasive and utterly destructive, as Luther notes, "Though hordes of devils fill the land all threat'ning to devour us..."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Luther's description of Satan's power rises to a crescendo in the hymn, when Luther solemnly declares, "The old satanic foe has sworn to work us woe! With craft and dreadful might he arms himself to fight. On earth he has no equal."<sup>13</sup>

Even as he speaks about the overriding power of Satan, Luther reminds his readers that we are not just Satan's victims; we are victims who have sinned. Before God, we are culpable. In the hymn, "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice," Luther writes:

Fast bound in Satan's chains I lay,  
death brooded fiercely o'er me,  
sin was my torment night and day;  
in sin my mother bore me.  
My own good works all came to naught,  
free will against God's judgement fought,  
so firmly sin possessed me.<sup>14</sup>

Possessed and controlled by sin, Luther confesses that he sought by his own power to free himself from Satan's grasp and sin's power. Luther's experience is personal, but is not confined to him. What he declares about himself is characteristic of every human being. The human condition, he asserts in the hymns, is universal. It is part of the genius of Luther's theological articulation that he creatively holds together the personal and the universal in his description of the human condition. Further, Luther boldly declares that there is hope that the bondage to sin, death, and the devil will end. The tyrant's "might is doomed to fail; God's judgment must prevail!"<sup>15</sup> Paradoxically, the hope which God graciously extends concretely through the Incarnation of God the Son comes in the very opposite of human expectation and longing, for "His royal pow'r disguised he bore, a servant's form, like mine, he wore, to lead the devil captive."<sup>16</sup> In this hope of liberation from captivity

7. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, 2006), hymn 517, v. 3, lines 1-3.

8. *Ibid.*, v. 2, line 2.

9. *Ibid.*, v. 3, lines 2 and 3.

10. *Ibid.*, hymn 504, v. 1, line 5.

11. *Ibid.*, v. 2, lines 1 and 2.

12. *Ibid.*, v. 3, lines 1 and 2.

13. *Ibid.*, v. 1, lines 3-5.

14. *Ibid.*, hymn 594, v. 2.

15. *Ibid.*, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," hymn 504, v. 3, lines 4 and 5.

16. *Ibid.*, "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice," hymn 594, v. 5, lines 5, 6 and 7.

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to the devil, in the hymn, "Our Father, God in Heaven Above," Luther urges the church to pray in song,

Your kingdom come: yours will it be  
in time and in eternity.  
Let your good Spirit from on high  
our hearts with gifts of grace supply.  
Break Satan's reign of hate and rage;  
preserve your church from age to age.<sup>17</sup>

Luther reminds the reader that the hope for God's eternal reign in Jesus Christ is grounded in the work of the Holy Spirit. It is God alone who out of grace can break and has broken Satan's "hate and rage." This salutary promise the church sings not only for itself but for the world.

Explicating the biblical witness, Luther speaks in universal terms of the saving event in Jesus, for the fundamental understanding of the human condition is that the whole world is in need of salvation which only God can give. In the hymn, "Savior of the Nations, Come," attributed to Ambrose of Milan (fourth century) and Martin Luther, those very words are in the opening line,<sup>18</sup> announcing the universal expanse of God's embrace in Jesus Christ. No nation is left out. Thus, Christians are exhorted to "let our faith shine ever new"<sup>19</sup> in witness to the salvation God graciously offers to all the world. The good news of God's universal embrace in Jesus Christ is couched in the language which is clearly borrowed from the biblical witness concerning the announcement of the angels. Luther writes, "From heav'n above to earth I come to bear good news to ev'ry home! Glad tidings of great joy I bring to all the world, and gladly sing..."<sup>20</sup> Also, "...this newborn child of lowly birth shall be the joy of all the earth."<sup>21</sup>

The story of God's gracious gift of Jesus for the salvation of the world does not stop at the birth of Jesus. Luther goes on to speak about the saving power of Jesus' death, specifically of Jesus' blood. "See, his blood now marks our door; faith points to it; death passes o'er."<sup>22</sup> In speaking about God's saving work in Jesus Christ, both his body and blood are intrinsically united. Thus, in verse 1 of "O, Lord, We Praise You" (the German hymn of the

17. *Ibid.*, hymn 747, v. 3.

18. *Ibid.*, hymn 263, v. 1, line 1.

19. *Ibid.*, v. 5.

20. *Ibid.*, "From Heaven Above," hymn 268, v. 1. See Luke 2:10.

21. *Ibid.*, v. 2, lines 2 and 3.

22. *Ibid.*, "Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands," hymn 370, v. 3, line 3.

**The decisiveness of faith in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit is at the heart of Luther's poetic explication of the Gospel in his hymns. Both the faith of the church and faith of the individual believer are highlighted.**

fifteenth century to which Luther added verses 2 and 3), we read the prayer, "May your body, Lord, born of Mary, that our sins and sorrows did carry, and your blood for us plead in all trial, fear, and need..."<sup>23</sup> Moreover, in calling attention to the healing power of the Eucharist—receiving and eating the body of Jesus—Luther tells the reader, "Christ alone, our holy meal, the hungry soul will feed and heal; faith lives upon no other! Hallelujah!"<sup>24</sup>

The decisiveness of faith in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit is at the heart of Luther's poetic explication of the Gospel in his hymns. Both the faith of the church and faith of the individual believer are highlighted. On the former, in the hymn, "Come Holy Ghost, God and Lord," Luther doxologically declares, "Lord, by the brightness of our light in holy faith your church unite: from every land and ev'ry tongue, this to your praise, O Lord, our God, be sung..."<sup>25</sup> In relation to the latter—the faith of the individual believer—we turn to two of Luther's hymns. First, in the hymn, "Out of the Depths I Cry to You," Luther writes:

Out of the depths I cry to you;  
O Lord God, hear me calling.  
Incline your ear to my distress in spite of my rebelling.  
Do not regard my sinful deeds. Send me the grace  
my spirit needs; without it I am nothing.<sup>26</sup>

Second, in the hymn, "In Peace and Joy I Now Depart," the decisiveness of faith in Christ is described thus: "...and faith fills all my mind and heart, calming, stilling"<sup>27</sup>; also, "...with eyes of faith and trust I see God's great favor."<sup>28</sup> Further, we note the inclusion of *solī Deo*, along with *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, and *solus Christus*, on the one hand, *vis-à-vis* trusting in one's good works to merit God's favor, on the other:

In you alone, O God, we hope, and not in our merit.  
We rest our fears in your good Word  
and trust your Holy Spirit.  
Your promise keeps us strong and sure; we trust the cross,  
your signature, inscribed upon our temples.<sup>29</sup>

The explicit high Christology replete in Luther's writings<sup>30</sup> does not minimize the reality of the humanity of Jesus. On the contrary, fully in accord with the witness of Scripture and the Creeds that the incarnation of the eternal Word of God occurs through the power of the Holy Spirit, Luther writes in the hymn, "Savior of the Nations Come,"

Not by human flesh and blood, but the mystic  
Breath of God,  
was the Word of God made flesh,  
fruit of woman, blossom fresh.<sup>31</sup>

Further, the unity of the two natures in the Person of Jesus Christ is emphasized in Jesus' unmitigated commitment to the salvific solidarity with sinful humanity. We see this unmistakably when Ambrose and Luther point to Jesus and say, "Very God, and Mary's son, eager now his race to run!"<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Luther provocatively declares that Jesus is the "...Word made flesh, our *elder brother*; that the lost might life inherit..."<sup>33</sup> Jesus would not turn his back on sinful humanity. With perspicacity in the hymn, "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice," Luther imagines Jesus movingly reminding Christians of the concrete reality of God's gracious promise in Jesus Christ. Luther writes:

To me he said: "Stay close to me,  
I am your rock and castle.  
Your ransom I myself will be;  
for you I strive and wrestle.  
The foe will shed my precious blood;  
all this I suffer for your good;  
my life o'er death will triumph."<sup>34</sup>

Here, on Jesus' lips Luther places Jesus' unflinching, loving act of total self-giving, even to the point of death for the salvation of sinful humanity, offering life in the face of death. The language bespeaks the battle Jesus engages, juxtaposing the image of his being the "ransom" for the sinner and the one who engages in a battle on behalf of life for the sinner. In this battle, Jesus promises he will triumph.

The image of battle is poignantly lifted up in the hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," in which Luther points to the eschatological hope beyond death. Luther writes:

God's Word forever shall abide, no thanks to foes, who

23. Ibid., hymn 499, v. 1, lines 5-7.  
24. Ibid., "Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands," hymn 370, v. 5, lines 3 and 4.  
25. Ibid., hymn 395, v. 1, lines 4-6.  
26. Ibid., hymn 600, v. 1.  
27. Ibid., hymn 440 (based on the *Nunc dimittis*), v. 1, line 2.  
Note the explicit mention of *sola fide* and *solus Christus*.  
28. Ibid., v. 2, line 2. Note the explicit reference to *sola fide* and *sola gratia*.

29. Ibid., "Out of the Depths I Cry to You," hymn 600, v. 3.  
30. This nomenclature refers to Luther's writings which have been published in diverse texts over the centuries.  
31. *ELW*, hymn 263 (attributed to Ambrose of Milan [fourth century] and Martin Luther), v. 2.  
32. Ibid., "Savior of the Nations Come, hymn 263, v. 3, line 2.  
33. Ibid., "We All Believe in One True God," hymn 411, v. 2, lines 5 and 6. Emphasis added.  
34. Ibid., hymn 594, v. 6.

**G**rounded in the witness of Scripture, the written Word of God, Luther's articulation of the Christian confession that God is in essence eternally Triune points to the theology of the cross: God's decisive and definitive self-disclosure in the paradox of Jesus' coming into the world in the lowliness of birth in a manger; his suffering, his weakness, and his death on the cross.

fear it; for God himself fights by our side with weapons of the Spirit...

The kingdom's ours forever!<sup>35</sup>

The eschatological hope that God's reign, in which the believer participates, is eternal<sup>36</sup> is grounded in God's Word of promise which "forever shall abide." Further, it is to be noted that Luther summarizes the Gospel in implicit Trinitarian language, speaking of God's unmistakable solidarity with sinners, fighting "by our side with weapons of the Spirit."

Grounded in the witness of Scripture, the written Word of God, Luther's articulation of the Christian confession that God is in essence eternally Triune points to the theology of the cross: God's decisive and definitive self-disclosure in the paradox of Jesus' coming into the world in the lowliness of birth in a manger; his suffering, his weakness, and his death on the cross. In Jesus, heaven and earth meet. In these excerpts from three of his hymns (a verse from each), we have images of the incarnation, death and glorification, and the saving power of Jesus:

O Lord, you have created all!  
How did you come to be so small,  
to sweetly sleep in manger-bed  
where lowing cattle lately fed?<sup>37</sup>

...

Christ Jesus lay in death's strong bands for our offenses given;  
but now at God's right hand he stands and brings us life

from heaven.<sup>38</sup>

...

The Son obeyed your gracious will,  
was born of virgin mother;  
and, your good pleasure to fulfill,  
he came to be my brother.

His royal pow'r disguised he bore,  
a servant's form, like mine, he wore,  
to lead the devil captive.<sup>39</sup>

The Lord, who is the Creator of all, does not disdain the human condition, but enters the world of sin where humankind is held in captivity by the devil. Earlier in this article, attention was drawn to Luther's use of ransom to describe Jesus' saving work. Here, he presents the image of Jesus, disguised in the form of a servant, making the captor—the devil—captive. Jesus' power is supremely greater than the devil's. Salvation is liberation from the power of the devil.

Lutheran theology has been characterized as a theology of the Second Article which is silent, or does not adequately speak, about the Third Article. By now, it should be evident to the reader that for Luther (and Lutherans), there is no Second Article without the Third Article. Thus, it is understood that the Holy Spirit does not make up for the absence of Jesus because he has ascended into heaven where he is seated at the right hand of the Father. Rather, the Holy Spirit mediates the presence of Jesus Christ. Through the Spirit, in the hearing of the promise of God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ, faith in Jesus Christ is effected and sustained in the here and now in the one who believes. The incarnation is "[n]ot by human flesh and blood, but the mystic Breath of God, was the Word of God made flesh, fruit of woman, blossom fresh."<sup>40</sup>

The Holy Spirit makes Jesus' saving work a reality in the life of the sinner who receives forgiveness through faith in Jesus. It is the Spirit who teaches the believer in Christ and sustains faith in Christ. Luther writes:

Now to my Father I depart,  
from earth to heav'n ascending,  
and, gracious wisdom to impart,  
the Holy Spirit sending,  
who will in trouble comfort you,  
will teach you well, your faith renew,  
and in all truth will guide you.<sup>41</sup>

Emphasizing the work of the Spirit mediated through the church in its witness to Jesus Christ, Luther writes: "We all con-

38. Ibid., "Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands, hymn 370, v. 1, lines 1 and 2.

39. Ibid., "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice," hymn, 594, v. 5. In "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," hymn 504, v. 3, line 5, Luther reminds the church, "One little word subdues him."

40. Ibid., "Savior of the Nations Come," hymn 263 (attributed to Ambrose of Milan [fourth century] and Martin Luther), v. 2.

41. Ibid., "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice," hymn 594, v. 7.

35. Ibid., hymn 504, v. 4, lines 1-3, and 5.

36. See *ibid.*, "We All Believe in One True God," hymn, 411, v. 3, lines 7 and 8, where Luther speaks of the eschatological hope thus: "All flesh shall rise; we shall be in bliss with God eternally."

37. Ibid., "From Heaven Above," hymn 268, v. 9; see, also, vv. 4-7, 10, 11.

fess the Holy Ghost...who the church, his own creation, keeps in unity of spirit. Here forgiveness and salvation daily come through Jesus' merit."<sup>42</sup> Given the challenges the believer faces in living in this world, Luther's use of the Medieval German *Leise* is a timely exhortation:

Now to the Holy Spirit let us pray  
for true faith, most needed on our way;  
Guide us and defend us when life is ending  
and our journey homeward is tending. Lord, have mercy!<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, we actually pray as we sing:

O Comforter of priceless worth, send peace and  
unity on earth; support us in our final strife  
and lead us out of death to life.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, it is always prayer to *the* One God, who is Triune. In the first three lines of the hymn aptly titled, "We All Believe in One True God," Luther declares: "We all confess the Holy Ghost who, in highest heaven dwelling with God the Father and the Son, comforts us beyond all telling...."<sup>45</sup> Though the Holy Spirit is not always named, it is in and through the Spirit that we praise the Lord Jesus Christ and thus the holy, blessed Trinity. Luther writes:

Praise we sing to Christ the Lord,  
virgin's son, incarnate Word!  
To the holy Trinity  
praise we sing eternally!<sup>46</sup>

There is a pervasive perception that Christians in the West who live their life of faith in Jesus Christ and interpret that faith in terms of the Lutheran Confessional heritage are quiet or restrained about evangelism. Indeed, the question has been asked whether Luther and Lutherans have a theology of mission.<sup>47</sup> However, when we read and ponder Luther's writings about the Gospel—what God has done in Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit, unambiguously articulated in terms of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone—we find the call to bear witness to Jesus Christ to all, including the stranger, is unmistakable and indispensable. Luther urges:

Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice, with exultation  
springing, and, with united heart and voice and holy  
rapture singing, proclaim the wonders God has done,

42. Ibid., "We All Believe in One True God," hymn 411, v. 3, lines 1, 4-6.

43. Ibid., "Now to the Holy Spirit Let Us Pray," hymn 743, v. 1 (Medieval German *Leise*, which is followed by verses 2-4 composed by Martin Luther).

44. Ibid., "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word, hymn 517, v. 3.

45. Ibid., hymn 411, v. 3, lines 1, 2, and 3.

46. Ibid., "Savior of the Nations, Come," hymn 263 (attributed to Ambrose of Milan [fourth century] and Martin Luther), v. 6.

47. For example, see G. Wingren, "Lutheran Theology and World Mission," in "Proceedings of the 2nd Assembly of the LWF" (Hanover 1952), 71-76 (71-73), and Hans-Werner Gensichen, "Were the reformers indifferent to missions." *Student World* 53, no. 1-2 (1960): 119-127.

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proclaim the vict'ry God has won,  
how precious was our ransom!<sup>48</sup>

Further, Luther makes clear that this witness of love in Jesus' name is to be radically inclusive when he writes:

O sweetest Love, your grace on us bestow;  
set our hearts with sacred fire aglow,  
that with hearts united we love each other,  
ev'ry stranger, sister, and brother. Lord, have mercy!<sup>49</sup>

With an honest realism that the way ahead will not be easy, Luther invites us to pray:

Transcendent comfort in our ev'ry need,  
help us neither scorn nor death to heed,  
that we may not falter, nor courage fail us  
when the foe shall taunt and assail us. Lord, have mercy!<sup>50</sup>

Again, pointing to the essential, unbreakable unity between the work of the Spirit and the work of Jesus Christ, Luther adds:

Shine in our hearts, O Spirit, precious light,  
that we Jesus Christ may know aright  
clinging to our Savior, whose blood has bought us,  
who to our true home-land has brought us. Lord, have mercy!<sup>51</sup>

48. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice," hymn, 594, v. 1.

49. Ibid., "Now to the Holy Spirit Let Us Pray," hymn 743, v. 2. See Ibid., "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice," hymn, 594, v. 8. Luther places these words on Jesus' lips, "What I on earth have done and taught guide all your life and teaching; *so shall the glorious reign of God increase, the whole world reaching*. Let none the gospel gift impede; I make you free; be free indeed! This final word I leave you." Italics added. The gospel is for the whole world.

50. <sup>50</sup> Ibid., v. 3. In the opening line of verse 1 of "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word," hymn 517, Luther prayerfully pleads, "Lord, keep us steadfast in your word...."

51. Ibid., v. 4.

Luther's approach to Christian vocation in the world has been aptly described as "faith active in love."<sup>52</sup> It is clear that Luther uses language which indicates that he sees the neighbor as including others beyond the boundaries of the church. He prays that "all the world may live in peace" and names "greed" as a threat to human well-being. In his hymn, "Our Father, God in Heaven Above," with pathos in the spirit of prayer, Luther poetically holds together basic personal needs, threats to personal and global well-being, and the longing and hope for peace which only God can give.

Give us today our daily bread;  
let ev'ryone be clothed and fed;  
in plague and famine, war and strife,  
preserve from all that threatens life;  
that all the world may live in peace,  
that greed be gone and love increase.<sup>53</sup>

### Conclusion

The foregoing theological reflection on Luther's poetic witness to the Gospel through his hymns prompts these two questions: What might it mean for congregational life and vitality in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, if there is an intentional, consistent theological focus on and reminder of the genre of poetry in the hymns—by Luther and a host of others—which is a powerful, creative instrument in calling the assembly, the individual believer, and the seeker to hear the good news of God's justifying grace in Jesus Christ for all? What might it mean for the church to remind itself and the world that justification—by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone—*and* justice are at the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ whom the Spirit makes present and to whom the Spirit invites into faith and to walk in love for the neighbor, to the glory of God?

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52. See George W. Forell, *Faith Active in Love* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1954; reprinted, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999).

53. *ELW*, "Our Father, God in Heaven Above," hymn 747, v. 5.